WELL PLAYED

Well Played
A Journal on Video Games, Values, and Meaning

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first ever video edition of the Well Played Journal. The impetus for this issue arose in March, 2014 at the South by Southwest Interactive Media Festival. Drew Davidson was giving a well played talk on mobile games (Crossy Road and Monument Valley to be exact), and I was in the process of preparing a well played talk on Dark Souls for the Games Learning Society (GLS) conference later that year. Drew and I chatted for a while after his session, and I mentioned to him that I was actually going to be recording the gameplay portion of my GLS talk for an ongoing Let's Play* (LP) that I'd been working on with my friend and colleague Paul Berberich. This prompted some general reflection on the nature of doing a well played analysis, similarities between the well played and let's play formats, and how tightly coupled the concept of well played is with the performative nature of video games. Drew mentioned that he'd been contemplating doing a video issue of the Well Played Journal, one thing led to another, and the result is here before you.

From my perspective, the animating concept behind this issue is that every Let's Play video is on some level that player/performer's attempt at giving their read of the game, and discovering or drawing out what makes it a well played game. Obviously, most LPs are recorded without a commitment to academic or critical rigor. In this light, this issue is a sort of bridge between the traditional LP, and the format for well played

analyses that this journal has worked to establish. In a sense, this issue seeks to bring the fundamental playfulness of the LP over into the context of a well played analysis, because after all, it's rather difficult not to be somewhat playful when you're actually playing and talking about the game as it unfolds. At the same time, the fact that the LP provides a record of play serves as a means for closing the loop between the live well played sessions that have taken place at a number of conferences, and the published format which allows for critical distance, but loses engagement with the actual live gameplay.

You will find that the contributors to this issue have pursued a variety of approaches in taking up the challenge of realizing a well played analysis through the Let's Play medium. Osvaldo Jimenez offers us a look at key design choices in South Park: The Stick of Truth. Mark Chen's playthrough and analysis of Fallout 4 emphasizes the tensions that can arise between a specific choice a player might make in trying to have a well played experience, and how a game's design can challenge that intention. The supercut Solon Scott has provided from his longer playthrough of Read Only Memories gives us a chance to see what it looks like for a traditional style adventure game to be well played. Solon gives special attention to how the themes of the game are realized through the type of detail that this genre affords. Melissa Peterson and Mark Chen's close read of Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos focuses on the design choices Westwood Studios made with much more limited technology to create a unique well played experience, while also exploring the personal significance of the game for Melissa as a player. Pippin Barr's Permadeath: Speedrun provides a completely different approach as he explores the concepts of "permadeath" and "speedrun", and what their import might be in video games more generally. Finally, Paul's and my contribution gives you a glimpse into an ongoing labor of play that has already spanned over two years of exploration into what exactly makes From Software's

Dark Souls a well played game, and what it means to perform a well played Let's Play.

We hope you enjoy this first video edition of the Well Played Journal. We're confident that it will give you some unique insights into each of the games our contributors have taken up. Ideally, it will also spur you to look a little differently at the process of giving a game a close read, what Let's Play videos are as performative activities, and perhaps even what can and should count as scholarship in the interdisciplinary field of game studies.

Moses Wolfenstein

* The Let's Play video phenomenon is an extremely successful online video genre where players record and narrate their video game experiences.

WHO NEEDS VIDEO GAMES? SOUTH PARK STICK OF TRUTH

By Osvaldo Jimenez

https://vimeo.com/199226299/deca18560c

https://youtu.be/CPX6xoDOYL8

This video analysis of the game South Park: The Stick of Truth approaches what makes the game "well played" by examining three factors in-depth. These factors are: How the game has been made to look exactly like the TV show, how the game integrated its role-playing game (aka RPG) elements into the South Park series, and the innovative ways that it catered to South Park fans, who may or may not be fans of RPGs.

FALLOUT 4: SUCCUMBING TO THE SIMULACRA

By Mark Chen

https://vimeo.com/199217338/dae9d20ea0

https://youtu.be/jQxVXt97TNc

Wherein Mark plays Nora, a newly-awoken-from-200-years-of-slumber suburbanite lawyer, thrust into a post-apocalyptic world full of mutants, raiders, and synthetic humans. Nora, as a lawyer, attempts to find her way in the world through negotiation, guile, and holding onto her pre-fallout morality. One of the game's main themes offers tensions from not knowing who's real and who's synthetic, but, by the end of the

game, it becomes clear to Mark-Nora that the game itself is synthetic, a poor ersatz version of a world in which to explore the morality play of the story's premise. Nora's journey leads her to become a ruthless killer outwardly, but, in actuality, she's transcended the bounds of the game world, as if becoming lucid in her nightmare.

Also, Mark talks about the lovely voice acting, characterization of the NPCs, and the general idea of a pacifist playthrough.

READ ONLY MEMORIES ~ A SUPERCUT AND ANALYSIS

By Solon Scott

https://vimeo.com/199220978/9f69268a97

https://youtu.be/U-lJ8KfC3uk

This supercut features highlights from the first chapter of RDLP's playthrough of Read Only Memories and an afterward from Solon with thoughts on the craft of Let's Playing after finishing the production on the Let's Play of Read Only Memories (ROM). Solon has been making Let's Plays for five years and has spoken and taught on the subject at Cornish University, University of Oregon, and University of

Washington. The focus of these Let's Plays has always been trying to identify themes of games and seeing what makes each game special and unique. This video in particular shows the many facets of Solon's personality that invites viewers to enjoy this genre of entertainment, sometimes thoughtful, sometimes jocular, but always playful and inviting.

LANDS OF LORE

By Melissa Peterson & Mark Chen

https://vimeo.com/199217572/d79efad276

https://youtu.be/QAKpSoLh6MI
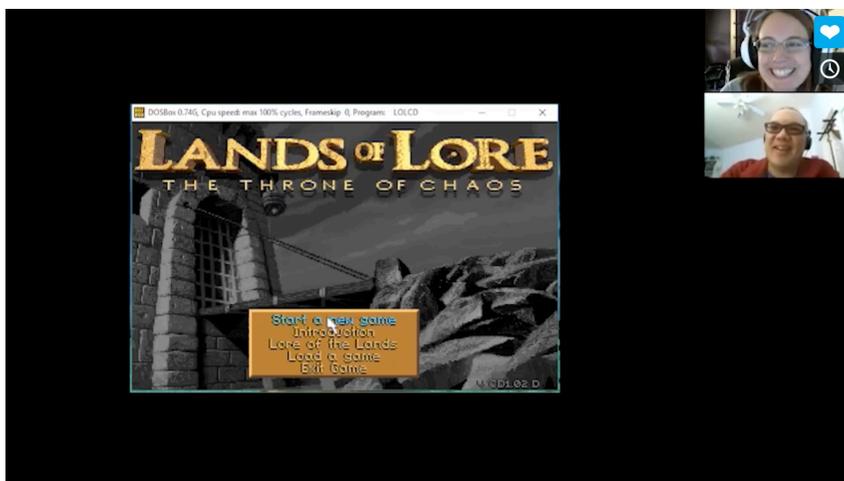
Melissa Peterson and Mark Chen discuss Westwood Studios' Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos. This classic genre-defying game combines elements of both adventure and role-playing games. Mark and Melissa reminisce about how this single player game: encouraged analog multi-player game play, was a gorgeous example of voice over dialog and pixel art, and informed the creation of their individual play styles with its high degree of difficulty. Also, Patrick Stewart.

PERMADEATH: SPEEDRUN

By Pippin Barr

Let's Play: Permadeath: Speedrun
by Pippin Barr

17:18   HD

https://vimeo.com/199218711/c3ea84a080

https://youtu.be/khYDoXw-Tz0

Videogames often have a difficult relationship with death. On the one hand it is generally portrayed, narratively, as the ultimate disaster for a player's character. On the other hand, mechanically death tends not to be the end at all, but rather merely one of many brief stops on the road through a linear story or toward a never-ending pursuit of points. In a permadeath run, one plays a game by agreeing to stop playing

immediately upon death, "resurrecting" the power of death as the final word. In a speedrun, one tries to finish a game as fast as possible. In a permadeath speedrun, one uses the idea that a death "finishes" a permadeath playing to complete a game very quickly indeed by actively seeking death. In doing so, games reveal themselves in strange ways. New approaches to play are required in order to find a swift death, and new stories are told as we contemplate the potential narrative framing of such play. In their opposition to conventional play, permadeath speedruns highlight the conventions themselves, while also telling us something about mortality in the land of videogames.

PREPARE TO SUFFER

By Moses Wolfenstein & Paul Berberich

https://vimeo.com/199220725/86499d0b1a

https://youtu.be/RhodiKK3kxs

Moses Wolfenstein and Paul Berberich have been recording the Let's Play series Prepare to Suffer with Paul and Mo since September, 2014. The video series charts Moses's first experience with From Software's Dark Souls, and at the time of this publication the series is still in progress. In this special recording for the Well Played journal, the two discuss what it means for Dark Souls to be a well played game, what it means to them to play a game well more generally, and how the concept

of a well played experience intersects with the practice of creating let's play videos. Moses advances a theory the two discussed in a well played session at the 2015 Games+Learning+Society conference that let's play videos can more generally be viewed as well played analyses conducted in the wild.

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http://www.etc.cmu.edu/etcpress/wellplayed
Twitter: @etcwellplayed

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Pippin Barr
https://youtu.be/khYDoXw-Tz0
pippin.barr@gmail.com

Paul Berberich
https://youtu.be/RhodiKK3kxs
paulberb@gmail.com

Mark Chen
https://youtu.be/jQxVXt97TNc
markdangerchen@gmail.com

Osvaldo Jimenez
https://youtu.be/CPX6xoDOYL8
ojimenez@pacific.edu

Melissa Peterson
https://youtu.be/QAKpSoLh6MI
mwbtle@gmail.com

Solon Scott
https://youtu.be/U-lJ8KfC3uk
solonscott@gmail.com

Moses Wolfenstein
https://youtu.be/RhodiKK3kxs
moses.wolfenstein@gmail.com